

**Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation
Mystic Aquarium – Institute for Exploration – Immersion Learning**

Testimony before the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut State Legislature

GOVERNOR RELL'S MARCH 1, 2010 DEFICIT MITIGATION PLAN

March 11, 2010

Good afternoon Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, Senator Debicella, Representative Miner and members of the Appropriations Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation, which operates Mystic Aquarium, Institute for Exploration and Immersion Learning. We are here to respectfully request that the proposed reductions in funding for our institutions as outlined in Governor Rell's March 1 Deficit Mitigation Plan be rejected.

Jointly, these institutions play a unique role in the state and serve as engines of the Connecticut tourism economy. Together, they are the primary providers of essential science education to every school district in the state, and serve as the state's primary sentinels in protecting our most precious natural and economic resource, Long Island Sound, and the animals that are essential to its vitality.

Connecticut's two aquariums attract and inspire over 1,225,000 people every year by engaging them in consideration of life forms and ocean environments that cannot otherwise be observed by most people. These visits bolster local, regional and state economic activity. In fact, the two institutions contribute \$114 million directly to the Connecticut economy. In addition, people come to aquariums for respite in times of duress, making these two institutions even more vital to the quality of life in Connecticut in difficult economic times like these.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation in Mystic are the primary economic engines for Connecticut's tourism industry. Over 60% of Mystic Aquarium's visitors and almost 40% of The Maritime Aquarium's visitors are from out-state, which means that these visitors stay overnight, eat at restaurants, shop in local stores and buy gasoline in Connecticut, all major contributions to Connecticut state revenue. In addition to the \$114 million in economic impact they generate, more than 1,730 jobs are directly dependent upon both institutions.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation collaborate regularly on animal care, rescue and rehabilitation of animals and most particularly on education programs

related to Long Island Sound. Together, we serve over 300,000 school children in the State of Connecticut, in every inner city and in nearly every school district.

Our education programs go directly into K-12 schools with hands-on learning activities correlated to the state's curriculum frameworks, live animals that inspire kids, after-school programs throughout the state, and numerous on-site programs at each institution that link students with scientists. We frequently bring kids out on Connecticut's rivers, shores and waterways and to study in the State's most remarkable classroom, Long Island Sound.

In fact, evaluations of educational programs at both institutions show that our marine oriented science programs are helping Connecticut school children show significant academic gains, encouraging career exploration in the sciences, and contributing to long-term impact on science literacy and concern for the environment.

Both institutions play a critical role in the protection of Long Island Sound. Mystic Aquarium is involved in rescuing and rehabilitating marine mammals, birds and other sea creatures, leading this effort not only in Long Island Sound but throughout New England. At Mystic Aquarium, a major research laboratory studies the health of marine mammals and is involved in exploring the correlation between marine animal health and human health issues. In Norwalk, The Maritime Aquarium's permanent exhibits focus exclusively on Long Island Sound. A long-term data monitoring project with several partners has been studying changes to the biodiversity of Long Island Sound. The Maritime Aquarium plays a leading role in the regional harbor seal census and participates actively in horseshoe crab monitoring. Both institutions sponsor public programming to engage people in cleaning, protecting and caring for Long Island Sound.

Over the past decade, both institutions have branched out to look for new revenue opportunities. The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk has an IMAX theater that attracts many repeat visitors. Sea Research Foundation opened "Challenge of the Deep", a museum hall dedicated to the work of resident explorer, Dr. Robert Ballard. Sea Research also launched a national distance learning program earning licensing fees from other aquariums and museums. Both institutions have added fee-based programs and amenities, promoted catering as a revenue source, and improved gift shop operations.

Exhibits and facilities in Aquariums are complex. Maintaining living creatures under water requires expertise in life support systems and continuous operation of pumps, filtration systems and other complex entities. The care of animals, including endangered or threatened species, must always be of primary concern. Since the economic crisis began, both institutions have cut expenses dramatically. Staffs were reduced by approximately 20% at Mystic and 29% at the Maritime, travel was curtailed, and maintenance at both institutions has been frozen or reduced. The continuing downturn has negatively affected visitation, which is down 20% across

the region and represents the largest revenue source for our institutions. The private giving environment is the most difficult it has been in 30 years, and operating support from foundations, corporations and individuals is falling short of budget. To date, we have not received the full budgeted funding from the State. This is, in effect, a 38% cut, at a time when we are experiencing a perfect storm of revenue decreases in all our other sources.

However, the unique nature of the facilities and mission, and the need to care for animals around the clock, limits the extent to which cost cutting can be achieved to deal with these shortfalls. We cannot shut down exhibits because they are *living* exhibits, nor can we easily transfer animals to other institutions because of regulatory restrictions.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation in Mystic are essential economic engines for Connecticut. Other communities and states will look to build these kinds of institutions to spur economic development in a down economy; we are seeking sustained, reliable state support so that we can continue to drive economic activity. The requested investment in these two institutions is critical. It is no small matter that both institutions are seeing other previously reliable sources of revenue eliminated.

Over the last several years, we, among many others, have seen our level of appropriation be reduced in order to be part of the solution to these budget problems. We are grateful for the continued State support, even though it may be less, and we have responded accordingly by making certain changes within our own operations and infrastructure to address adequately the budget predicament. Our ability to continue to do so is reaching its limit. As mentioned, each institution has reduced its workforce and trimmed other operating expenses in order to manage these fiscal challenges but we have done so in such a way to ensure that we remain viable, competitive and attractive. At this point, we have exhausted these internal remedies, and our concern is that, with continued erosion of this critical State support, especially at the suggested 40% decrease, the ability to remain viable, competitive and attractive will be compromised.

We respectfully request that the Governor's proposed reductions to the Maritime Center and the Mystic Aquarium as contained in the most recent Deficit Mitigation Plan be rejected. Investment in these two institutions at the currently appropriated amounts will return 92 times this amount to the State of Connecticut in direct economic impact, and continue to pay dividends in demonstrated improvement in the academic performance of Connecticut's school children. Both institutions are committed to using state funds to drive economic development; for advertising and marketing aimed at attracting tourism, and for support of educational programs benefiting nearly every child in Connecticut.

State funding for tourism and state investment in advertising to promote itself as destination has been eliminated. We are fiftieth in the nation in terms of investing advertising dollars to bring people into the state who will spend money and generate tax revenue for the state coffers. It is important to consider the value of the state appropriation for The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation, which operates Mystic Aquarium, against this backdrop. To a large extent these institutions are carrying the bulk of any effort to attract people to the State, a role that is played in other states by the state itself.

Thank you for your attention.